

Hot Dog

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I was a wiener that winter. It sure beat being a wiener in the summer. Too bad the suit still smelled like Summer Guy's armpits. I waved and danced. Jim insisted. Said I couldn't be a stiff wiener. The crude bastard said it with a wink.

Sixth and Cedar was my corner. It was also Liza the loiterer's, and she often used the line, "Spare a quarter for a hot dog," while gesturing toward me as though I was her accomplice. Sometimes I wished I was. That woman sure made out on the weekends. In more ways than one, I was sure.

Meanwhile, I got spit at by truckers, heckled by high schoolers, and punched in the gut by six-year-olds. Friends drove by yelling, "Dave!" but I couldn't turn my head. Liza would just stare at me like she was on some sort of hallucinogenic adventure, cocking her head like a puzzled puppy and winding her unwashed, unintentionally dreadlocked hair around her grimy middle-aged fingers. Sometimes she grinned, and, if the sun was shining just right, I could make out a decayed twelve-year molar and a halfway-decent, mostly-white incisor. I felt bad for her, but it seemed to me that she'd seen enough change to rent herself a room. And the more I danced, waved, and watched, the more I think she actually liked life on the streets.

I suppose if I was going to be a street dweller, I'd pick Seattle, too. Quirky, rainy, old, yet new, with plenty of oversized art, skyscraper lobbies, library corners, metropolitan parks, saltwater docks, with a uniquely diverse population: givers, takers, artists, freaks, wanna-be artists, wanna-be freaks, gutter punks, Hot Topic punks, hot girls, grungy girls, sporty girls, hippie girls, glamour girls, glamour guys, Average Joes, and Lazy Susans. And they all drank coffee. Espresso drinks, three dollars at a time. More if you went to Starbucks—which meant that you were probably a yuppie, a cubicle farmer, or a Nordstrom-shopping college student living off of Daddy's cash. Either way, it's pretty safe to say, everyone fit in, in Seattle.

Liza usually loitered alone, but sometime after the New Year began,

she began sharing her blanket with a younger woman friend. The woman was dirty, heavily clothed, and carried only a ragged backpack, which she rummaged through often, never pulling anything out. I found it interesting that she wore rose-colored glasses. The frames were square and they practically took up her entire face. A face I couldn't stop staring at through the misaligned, horribly disguised eye holes punched in between an onion square and a ketchup glob. She really was kinda pretty, in a dirty sorta way. I wondered how she got to be a lady of the streets. It was easy to wonder these things while passing as a hot dog. Just so long as I waved.

One particularly rainy Saturday, I saw the mysterious woman friend rummaging in a recycling bin, pulling out several beer cans. I thought of my college buddies who drank three cases a night Thursday through Sunday.

The next week I handed her a garbage bag full of cans. She appeared grateful that a seven-foot wiener cared. I asked her name. She whispered, "Bunny."

That day I danced lighter, faster, with my freshest moves. Jim said business was up. Bunny ate a cheesesteak.

Two nights later, it snowed. Rare for Seattle, but it did. Stuck to the streets and the top of my suit. And Bunny's blanket. I bought her hot chocolate on my break. I wanted to buy her a suite at the Marriot. I couldn't afford it, but I told her how to sneak into their pool. It was heated and surrounded by a jungle, complete with white Christmas lights and two jetted hot tubs. They even had heated towels, I told her. I offered to pay for her cab, but she refused.

The next day I brought her a snowsuit. It was hot pink and puffy. She looked surprised, but thanked me while looking at the ground. By three o'clock she was wearing it. At eight o'clock I was off, free from my suit, paycheck in hand. I decided to go to a party.

On my way, I saw Bunny. She didn't recognize me as the Wiener Guy. I asked her if she wanted to go to a party—a rave—she didn't even have to change. "Sure," she said, and walked with me.

Someone gave her Ecstasy. She danced like a pink, puffy marshmallow. A glittery girl with blue hair gave her wings. I found her later rolling around in the fluff room, throwing cotton balls in the air next to a cuddle puddle of hallucinating twenty-somethings. She gave me a handful of purple dryer lint

and a hug, leaving a mild tinge of body odor, fabric softener and candy cologne on my shoulders.

As the sun rose, we left, walking silently to the dance beats repeating in our heads, alone and awake on the sleepy Seattle streets. I took her back to her corner, but offered to rent her a room at the Empress Motel. She looked at me with sad, dilated eyes.

"Look, Dave," she started. Then stopped. "You really shouldn't spend your money on me. I know you don't really make—"

"It's cool, really," I interrupted. "I know times are tough and we all need help sometimes."

Bunny sighed. "I should tell you something, but you can't tell anyone else or it will be the end of me."

"Tell me, I won't say anything, I swear," I said, with complete honesty.

She took off her rose-colored glasses. "Do you recognize me?" she asked. She had a familiar look about her, but I had always thought that. Then she took off her hat. A cascade of dirty blonde hair fell over her shoulders. I was looking at Cameron Diaz.

"What the hell?" I said.

"Shhh. Don't say anything," she whispered as she put her hat on her head. "There's a secret society of us. It's our escape from the paparazzi, from the money, from the fame."

I was speechless for a moment. She continued. "I know it's weird, crazy almost. But that's the way I am. The way we all are. But we can't help it. The media made us this way. Everyone's so obsessed with our lives; sometimes we just need an escape. A real one, one the paparazzi won't even know about, one they wouldn't even consider."

I stared at her in awe; then I opened my mouth. I really shouldn't have. "Are you still dating Justin Timberlake?" I asked. "That'd be so cool if he was bumming around out here, too. Maybe he could, like, teach me some dance moves or something, maybe give me his autograph," I blurted.

With wide eyes, she looked at me stunned, betrayed; then turned and ran, puffy and pink and swishing, until all I could see was a streetlight, beaming down on Liza, loitering on our corner with a Louis Vuitton wallet and a sly smirk in her eyes.